



THE LOST THING

Shaun Tan

Teacher's Notes

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INTRODUCTION

The Lost Thing is the first picture book that Shaun Tan has both written and illustrated, and the result is a wonderful, warm, humorous story that will be read and enjoyed by a wide range of ages. There is so much to pore over and ponder in this book that it will be a welcome addition to the resources that teachers have to draw on.

The story is an age-old and familiar “lost dog story” told by the boy and addressed to the reader. It is a matter-of-fact anecdote, full of interest and compassion, but the accompanying illustrations make *The Lost Thing* extremely challenging. The juxtaposition of text and drawings make a book that is both thought-provoking and filled with food for thought.

The Lost Thing can be used in the classroom from middle primary right through to upper secondary and a great deal can be gained by those who read it.

LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

The language the story is written in is simple and ostensibly straight forward, however Shaun Tan is constantly challenging the reader with his unexpected use of words and concepts – look at the meaning of the word *weird* for instance and the summary of ‘the thing’: “*It was quite friendly though, once I started talking to it*” when depicted on the page is a huge, indefinable, outlandish creature.

The narrator tells the story in a familiar “What I did in the holidays” mode.

Question: *What is the effect of this simple language and minimal text?*

Question: *What was a real dilemma for the narrator? (Page 16)*

Satire

Satire in literature holds the mirror up for us to look at our society, our foibles and ourselves. Look at the place of satire in *The Lost Thing*.

Metaphor

Look at *The Lost Thing* as being a metaphor and thus having different meanings from what appears on the surface. Discuss this with the class.

Understatement

Look at the place understatement plays in *The Lost Thing*.

Opening

Look particularly at the beginning of the story and comment.

Ending

What is the impact at the end of the story?

What do you think has happened to the narrator?

Characters

Do a character study of the narrator, outlining what he is like and what he enjoys doing.

What other characters are in the story? What part do they play?

***Activity:** Look at the lost thing itself, and make a list of words, which describe it.*

Humour

What makes the story humorous? Where does the humour come from? Discuss with the class different sorts of humour and look at the ingredients that comprise humour.

Setting

Where is the story set?

What is the general environment and atmosphere of the story? How is it established?

What is the background to the story?

Style

Comment on the style in which *The Lost Thing* is written.

VISUAL LITERACY

There is a bizarre contrast between the words and the illustrations.

Question: *What does the cartoon-like surreal style of the illustrations do for the story?*

Activity: *Initially, read the story to the class without saying anything and without showing them the cover. Ask them to comment. Then allow time for them to study the book as a whole and then discuss what impressions they had at first and what they now think.*

The visual language in ***The Lost Thing*** is part of the interpretation of the whole work. In this book there are many levels of communication and by studying the drawings in detail the reader can interpret a great deal. Shaun Tan's illustrations are incredibly sophisticated and require a good deal of time to study them in depth and think about them. Every time ***The Lost Thing*** is looked at more will be gleaned as the layers of meaning and the readers' interpretation of what is being presented come through so that more aspects of the story are revealed.

Activity: *What do the illustrations in this book convey to the reader? Allow students to respond to their feeling of the work after they have had time to read the book. Make a list of their reactions on the board and add new contributions to it.*

The words and pictures elicit emotional responses. Look at the mood, colours, energy and effect the illustrations convey to the reader.

The detail in *The Lost Thing* is phenomenal.

Question: *Look at how the pages are completely filled, so that there is no space. What is the readers' response? What feeling does it give? What does this do for the overall story? Look at the use of contrasts: small and large, hard and soft, light and dark.*

Activity: Examine the signs, stamps and shapes, perspective and perception and ascertain the students' response to these. Look carefully at the small print.

Question: Discuss with the students where the eye is taken as one looks at the drawings and examines details.

Question: Discuss whether the mood of the story changes and why and how Shaun Tan achieves these shifts.

Activity: Look at the dress, attitude and actions of the figures in the story and what feeling they transmit.

Activity: Look at the "small advertisement" that caught the narrator's attention in detail and ask the class to comment.

Technology

The book is set in a futuristic world full of industrial shapes and belching smoke.

Question: What is the effect of this?

Activity: Make a list of the shapes and objects that comprise the world of **The Lost Thing**.

Question: Look at the background of the physics and maths text books and what feeling this gives to the story.

Art Work

Look at the style of *The Lost Thing*.

Question: What does Shaun Tan's cartoon-like style do for the story?

Research: The drawings almost have a three-dimensional aspect. How is this achieved? What media has Shaun Tan used?

DESIGN AND LAYOUT

Look at the way the text in *The Lost Thing* is printed.

Question: *How does this fit into the story?*

Examine the way boundaries of what we normally expect are changed, for instance the end papers, the title page, and the acknowledgments.

Look at the unusual layout of the book, the composition of the pages and the density of the illustrations and what effect this has. Look at how the text is framed. Examine the way things are balanced. Examine the different arrangement of the illustrations and what the placement of them achieves.

Question: *What is the purpose of the pages without words? What is the impact of the double-page spread on pages 25-26 where the book has to be turned to read it?*

Art Appreciation

Examine how the illustrations have been done. Examine the background collages of the text books and the multi-layering of some of the text.

Question: *What does this achieve?*

At the end of the book, Shaun Tan gives apologies to Jeffrey Smart, Edward Hopper and John Brack.

Research: *Look into why he has done this*

DISCUSSION POINTS

With the class, discuss the following in relation to *The Lost Thing*:

The bottom line, economic rationalism, apathy, appearances, attitudes, bureaucracy, perception, qualifications, red-tape, curiosity, the attitude of parents, the order of things, communication: how do we communicate? What different forms of communication are there?

Philosophy

There are numerous questions posed for the reader.

- Look at the question of what we see. What it is like to be different? Where are we going?

Look at why no-one seemed to notice the lost thing. What does being “lost” mean? What about belonging?

- What is real?
- Are people interested in things for their own sake?

The author gives us lots of messages in *The Lost Thing*.

- What are some of these?
- What is the meaning of “profound”?

“And don’t ask me what the moral is”

- What do you think the moral of the story is?

“Today is the tomorrow we were promised yesterday”

- Discuss

The narrator states: *“And I can’t say what it all meant”*

- Can you?
- What do you think some of Shaun Tan’s beliefs are?

Writing

Activity: Write about: *What if...*